

## THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN QUEBEC

### The evolving historical landscape

Quebec will soon be the only Canadian province or territory in which "History" is a compulsory core subject throughout the whole of the public school system. This is an opportunity to situate history as a key discipline and to secure its introductory academic place for the foreseeable future.

For unknown reasons, the Anglophone academic historical community has not yet embraced this opportunity to anchor their own discipline. Fundamental decisions are being made and long-term plans cemented and the apparent absence of this necessary voice is indeed unfortunate.

### History is big business in the schools of Quebec

In order to acquire the official high school leaving certificate, Quebec adolescents must successfully pass a battery of "uniform examinations" given during the last two years of their secondary school experiences. One of these examinations is the omnipresent "History 414" (The History of Quebec and Canada)! During the June 1999 exam period, for example, fourteen uniform final examinations (seven in each language) were written by 157,718 students who, in total, sat for 362,527 separate examinations (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2000, p. 16).



The place, purpose and role of history is going through a period of serious reflection and debate. In spite of the tugs and demands of the other competing subject areas, history – as a separate and distinct subject – is going to be taught (along with its new companion "citizenship education") at every level of the school system.

While there is still much to decide, there is no question that the cultural ongoing concerns of "whose history?" and "which history?" are going to provide much fodder for intellectual debate. Granatstein (*Who Killed Canadian History?* p. 37) may well be overly optimistic in suggesting that Quebec's professional historians, as an interest group, are embracing a service to the educational community. As a community, they do not appear to be intimately involved in the fundamental revisions that are occurring throughout the whole of the public educational system.

To a cynical few, the placement of this uniform history examination at the end of grade ten is most fortuitous. With a general province-wide failure rate constantly hovering in the 25% range, it is indeed opportune that some pupils have another year or so of schooling in order to prepare for a second attempt to formally demonstrate a bare minimum comprehension of their own history.

### A decade of investigations: The 'Estates General' and *Learning From The Past*

As Quebec entered the last decade of the twentieth century, the Ministry of Education felt that a watershed had been reached. The previous great look at public education had taken place in the mid 1960's and, while scattered debates and discussions related to specific educational issues had occurred periodically since then, it was felt that the time was ripe for a more serious general overall look at the entire

education system from primary through to university. A meaningful step in this consultative process was the establishment of the “Estates General on Education”.

Notwithstanding all of the possible and potential issues that parents, professionals, administrators, lobby groups, religious organizations, students, and the general public could raise about elementary, secondary and collegial education, it is most illustrative that the Estates General felt compelled to highlight the teaching of history. Specifically and most importantly, the Report noted: “*Students deplored the weakness of their education in the humanities, a weakness that prevents them from understanding politics, the economy and, more generally, current events. According to representatives of the cultural milieu, **history** is the subject most likely to give students a better understanding of their roots, make them aware of the value of their heritage and open their minds to international realities.*” (emphasis in original; Ministère de l’Éducation, 1996, p. 43)

As a direct result of the issues raised in the Estates General Report, the Ministry of Education convened a special “Task Force on the Teaching of History” to investigate how the general recommendations of the Estates General could be transformed into more immediate and manageable scholastic programs. “The teaching of history, probably more than that of any other subject, must therefore be renewed constantly. ... In history...the answers of yesterday’s society are sometimes no longer those opted for by contemporary society.” (*Learning From the Past*, 1996, p. 1)

## The unfolding Quebec historical scene

Since the late 1990’s, numerous committees of teachers and other professionals have been wrestling with the pedagogical place and implications of history instruction in the public sector. While discussions and fine-tuning are still ongoing, a broad sweep indicates that history, as a separate and distinct discipline (along with its new appendage “citizenship education”), will be compulsory at every level of the school system.

In particular, the new “Geography, History and Citizenship Education” course will be compulsory for all elementary grades from two to six. Continuing the trend, each and every year of secondary school will see a specific history course. Tentatively, the schedule is as follows:

Secondary I (grade 7)	General History I: prehistory/antiquity/Middle Ages
Secondary II (grade 8)	General History II: Renaissance/Industrial/Modern
Secondary III (grade 9)	History of Quebec and Canada: pre-Amerindian to 1791
Secondary IV (grade 10)	History of Quebec and Canada: 1791 to present
Secondary V (grade 11)	Problems/Issues of the Modern World
CEGEP (grades 12 & 13)	Scope and sequence still being determined

As of September 2001, many of the elementary level recommendations have been implemented. Teachers are now dealing with the added domain called “citizenship education”. This, in and of itself, raises a whole host of academic and pedagogical issues not the least of which are: “What academic background do teachers now need?” as well as “What is citizenship education, anyway?”

Several secondary revision committees are currently hard at work so that the various sequential history revisions for grades 7 through to 11 can commence, at least on a trial basis, with the September 2002 academic year. Assuming that plans remain on track, the CEGEP courses would be up for overhaul within a couple of years.

## Closing concerns

A surprise on this landscape is the almost total absence of the academic history community. Deep and fundamental historical and societal issues are being raised and long-term province-wide strategies being implemented.

Serious discussions are ongoing regarding the way that history is taught, the kind of history that should be included in the curriculum, the history preparation that ever increasing numbers of new teachers should have, as well as the most appropriate ways to evaluate acquisition of historical knowledge. Where are the historians, why is their collective voice muted, and why is this academic community not taking on a positive leadership role?

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